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ABSTRACT

Elements that might be included in a course syllabus are discussed, and reasons for a well-written syllabus are briefly noted. The following syllabus elements are covered: course description, course objectives, course structure, textbook and required materials, recommended optional materials, course schedule, deadlines, evaluation methods, policy on re-tests, attendance, statement on plagiarism and cheating, and resource and reference lists. Included are examples of course descriptions, which provide in two or three sentences an overview or general purpose of the course. A list of possible course objectives, which need to clearly communicate expected performance, is also provided, along with an example of how to describe a course structure, which may involve many formats (e.g., lectures, laboratory, contract plan, field trips). Advice on developing the course schedule and on setting and specifying deadlines addresses difficulty students often have in pacing themselves. The following evaluation methods are considered: assignments, examinations, and the grading system. Use of weighting or percentage systems for grades is briefly addressed, and policies on tests and ways of evaluating students are noted. (SW)

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WHAT DOES YOUR COURSE SYLLABUS COMMUNICATE?

By Doris R. Brodeur

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What Does Your Course Syllabus Communicate?

One of the areas of concern in program evaluations, such as those conducted by the North Central Association of Schools and Colleges, is the quality of instruction for each course offered in the curriculum. The evaluation team members may observe classes in session, but much of their attention is focused on written documentation. The course syllabus often becomes a major portion of the evidence upon which the quality of instruction is judged. For this reason, it is important that a course syllabus communicate clearly the nature of the instruction that is taking place.

While communicating with evaluators and accreditation associations is important for a program's survival, there are more compelling reasons for well-written syllabi. Students have a need and a right to know in advance what will be expected and what to expect from the course and the instructor. While the course syllabus is not a legally binding document, more and more legal cases are decided on the clarity of the communication of expectations to students. A course syllabus

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is one way to clearly set forth the objectives of the course as well as the expectations of the student. The student knows ahead of time not only what the course will cover, but what will be expected in terms of assignments, examinations, attendance, and other requirements.

The course syllabus communicates to other faculty as well. Many programs depend on part-time faculty to teach multiple sections of undergraduate courses. These faculty are expected to keep their courses consistent with the other sections of the same course. A clear, well-designed course syllabus can help to provide some consistency of content and requirements to a particular course. In some instances, evaluation teams have recommended that an institution try to standardize on a particular form for a course syllabus to insure that courses are consistent and that academic policies and issues are made clear to the students.

A course syllabus may be as informal as a simple outline that resembles the table of contents in the textbook or as formal as a contract stipulating the terms under which a grade will be awarded. While the form and style of a course syllabus vary from one instructor to another, certain elements should be considered. An instructor may or may not decide to in-

clude this element in every syllabus.

General Information

Name of College

Course Number and Title

Date (quarter or semester) Instructor' Name

Clock Hours, Credit Hours Office Address

Meeting Place Office Phone

Prerequisites Office Hours

Course Description

Course Objectives

Course Structure

Textbook and Required Materials

Recommended Optional Materials

Course Schedule

Deadlines

Evaluation Methods

Assignments

Examinations

Grading System

Policy on Re-tests

Attendance

Statement on Plagiarism and Cheating

Resources and References

Course Description. In two or three sentences, the course description provides an overview or general purpose to the course. It answers the questions: "What is this course about?", "What is the main reason for this course?", "What is the overall effect (result) for the student?" Quite often, the course description is the one provided in the college's catalog. If students have chosen a course based on the catalog description, stating that description confirms his/her expectations.

Many descriptions begin with phrases such as:

This course is designed to provide the student with ....
This course examines ...
The basic goal(s) of this course is (are) to ...
The purpose of this course is to ...

The following examples were found in various samples of course syllabi:

This course is designed to provide the student with a basic background which will enable him to effectively create, transmit, and manage product information and message from the seller to the buyer, resulting in the desired response by the buyer. Emphasis is placed on defining the potential consumer and his behavior,

selecting the proper promotional methods, and managing the promotional program.

The course is designed to provide the student with an understanding of the fundamental principles underlying the behavior of engineering materials. The relationship between the structure and properties of ceramic, metallic, and polymeric materials is emphasized.

The course:

a) presents the laws, regulations, and standards that impact long-term care facilities management;

b) discusses client rights and responsibilities and their implications in managing such facilities;

c) stresses ethical and moral issues confronting the manager;

d) reviews risk management and strategies for providing safe and comfortable environments.

Course Objectives. Writing instructional objectives for a course is as important as writing them for individual units of instruction. Course objectives communicate expectations to the student, serve as a guide for the instructor, help to select instructional media and methods, help to decide the learning environment and course structure, and help to assure proper evaluation. The style and amount of detail in the

objectives depend on the teaching style of the instructor and the nature of the course. Some courses, such as nursing education, demand detailed daily objectives and many instructors include the entire list in the syllabus. For other areas, general objectives are adequate for the syllabus with more detailed objectives left for individual units. The important matter is that the objectives be written from the students' perspective, and clearly communicate the expected performance.

Course objectives are often listed as follows:

Upon completion of this course, the student will be able to...

Upon completion of this course, the student must demonstrate that he is able to...

The course is designed so that the student will be able to...

At the end of the course, you will be able to ...

In many syllabi, instructors will use one of the above beginning phrases and follow it with a list that begins with the word "to".

To write, test, and debug a variety of programs typical of business applications.

To compare past public health practices with those of the twentieth century.

To explain and discuss the communication process model.

To locate and analyze pertinent market information.

To type at a rate of 55 words per minute with fewer than one error per minute.

Course Structure. The description of the structure of the course is optional in a course syllabus. For some courses, like Typing 101, the structure may be obvious. It would be difficult to conceive of a typing course that did not have typing laboratory experiences. Other courses, such as Biology 101, may be principally lectures with additional laboratory time, or they may be completely self-paced as in an Audio-Tutorial System of Instruction. Depending on a student's own learning style and preference, he/she may want to know the intructional approaches that will be emphasized in the course. Strategies and approaches may be described as: lectures, laboratory, independent study, contract plan, small group activities, seminar, self-paced learning, field trips, audio-tutorial lessons, computer-assisted instruction, directed discussion groups, demonstrations, role playing, and guest speakers.

Course structure may be described as follows:

The laboratory work will relate closely to the lecture material. Whenever practical, the classes are arranged with two students in each group so that each

student participates in the work.

The course will be divided into two phases: first, a series of lectures, discussions, and demonstrations on the theory and application of technology in education; second, a series of hands-on sessions with equipment and production techniques. During this latter phase, the class will be divided into two groups. The groups will alternate between class and laboratory work.

Course Schedule. The course schedule is often displayed on the page as a calendar, particularly if the class meets four or five times a week. Typically, the schedule contains the date or week of the class meetings, the topics to be covered in class meetings, the readings and activities associated with each topic, and the dates to turn in assignments and projects. Some instructors prefer to omit specific references to dates to allow for greater flexibility of pacing in the course, and to be able to use the schedule from one quarter to the next with few modifications.

Deadlines. The need to set and specify deadlines depends on the teaching style of the instructor, the nature of the assignments, and the self-motivation of

the learners. While one might assume that college and university students are able to pace themselves and set their own deadlines, the temptation to wait until the last minute is often greater than their motivation. From my observations, students do not resent imposed deadlines, as long as they are set and announced from the start of the course. If deadlines are set, they should be adhered to by both the students and the instructor. Consequences for failing to meet the deadlines should be clearly explained in the syllabus.

Statements of deadlines may be written as follows:

All projects will be due and all tests will be taken as scheduled.

All assignments are due as scheduled for full credit. No assignments will be accepted after (date).

Projects may be turned in at any time during the course. All projects must be in by (date).

Assignments are due as scheduled for full credit. Assignments will be accepted, for less than full credit, up to two weeks beyond the deadline. After that, assignments will earn no credit.

Evaluation Methods. One of the critical sections in a course syllabus is the explanation of the course requirements and the methods by which student achievement will be measured. This section includes the

listing of the assignments, projects, written examinations, and other evaluation procedures, as well as the grading system that will be used.

Some instructors use a weighting system for grades based on a certain number of points for each assignment or test; others prefer to use a percentage system. The explanation of the grading system should also include statements on the instructor's and the college's policies for incomplete grades and pass/fail options.

Evaluation methods include: paper-and-pencil tests (objective, essay, standardized), critiques, case studies, displays, products, projects, class participation, written reports, mediated reports, and oral presentations.

The method of evaluation depends on the nature of the objective. For example, for cognitive skills, such as recalling Ohm's Law, or summarizing the purpose of the European Common Market, paper-and-pencil tests and oral examinations are appropriate. For process skills, such as driving a car, or conducting an orchestra, a performance checklist can be used. For evaluating the creation of products such as clay sculptures, a gourmet meal, or a written report, a product rating checklist may be useful. For determining attitudes and awareness, such as tolerance for divergent opinions, or appreciation for artistic expression, long-term observation or attitude scales may be called for.

While it is not possible here to go into great detail about the appropriate use of evaluation methods, it is important to emphasize that the method of evaluation should be closely matched to the objectives set forth at the outset. Too often, instructors base student evaluation and grades solely upon written examinations when the objectives and requirements of the course have included application, analysis, synthesis of ideas and have often resulted in tangible products.

Testing. The instructor may want to describe the kind of written examinations that are usually given. Although it is usually clear to students that they must all take the written examinations, the instructor must anticipate the need for procedures for situations when students are absent during examination periods. The statements in this section of the syllabus should explain the policies on tests that are missed due to absence, and the re-taking of tests that were failed the first time. Often, the instructor may rely on statements of policy in the college student handbook, but it doesn't hurt to repeat them in the syllabus.

Statements may say:

Tests missed due to absence will be made up if excused in advance only.

Missed examinations will be made up at the in-

structor's convenience.

If a student is unable to take a chapter quiz on a designated date, he or she is to inform the instructor beforehand and the make-up must be taken within a week of the original date.

Attendance. The policy on student attendance is usually stated in general terms in the college student handbook. It is up to the course instructor to decide how important class attendance and participation are for a specific course. If class attendance is expected, then students need to know. If class participation is included in the grading system, this needs to be clearly explained in the syllabus.

Sample statements from various course syllabi include:

You are expected to be in class on time. Excessive absence or frequent tardiness will affect your grade.

Class attendance is decided entirely by the student. However, regular attendance is advised.

Class attendance is mandatory since all work that is for a grade is completed during class time under supervision of the instructor.

Attendance is required for all class and lab work. Two absences will be allowed for the quarter. Any

additional absences will result in a reduction of the final grade.

Plagiarism and Cheating. While statements on plagiarism and cheating are not found in very many syllabi, the incidents of plagiarism and cheating need to be anticipated. Some instructors prefer not to include statements of this kind because they do not want to "put ideas into anyone's head". Unfortunately, incidents of plagiarism and cheating do occur. It is recommended that instructors at least be familiar with the college and university policies on these issues, and with the procedures to follow if any problems arese.

Resources and References. The students may find it useful to have listings of resources and reference materials to supplement the textbook. Instructors often place books, articles, and nonprint materials on reserve in the library for students to use. Listing resources in the syllabus, with their location for easy retrieval, is helpful to students and librarians alike.

The length and style of a course syllabus depend on the nature of the course, the level of the students, and most especially the teaching style that is personal to each instructor. What is presented here is the accumulation of ideas from instructors on various elements included in their collective syllabi. The issue raised here is not what one's policies, teaching style, instructional strategies, and course structures ought to be, but rather the importance of clearly communicating these ideas and policies to students, to other faculty, and to those persons or agencies responsible for evaluating courses and programs.

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